

Romney cheers troops at Otis

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By Peter DeMarco
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BOURNE — Trading his sports coat for a zip-up green Air National Guard flight jacket, Governor Mitt Romney hopped aboard the back of a Humvee yesterday and thanked hundreds of Army and Air guards and Coast Guard members for answering the call to protect the country during the war in Iraq.

As visits go, it was not a long one: The governor spent about 20 minutes on the tarmac at the Otis Air National Guard base, on the grounds of the Massachusetts Military Reservation, shaking hands and posing for photos with servicemen and women before heading to his next engagement.

But at a time when captured American soldiers' pained faces are being broadcast on Iraqi television, and war protests persist at home and abroad, the servicemen and women and their families here, many with friends and loved ones already overseas, said Romney's words meant a lot.

"It's good to see the boss come out here," said Lieutenant Colonel Dan Epright, on active duty at Cape Cod Air Force station in nearby Sagamore, referring to the governor's dual role as commander of the state's National Guard. "If your mom and dad are encouraging you at the Little League game,



AP PHOTO

Governor Mitt Romney, with Staff Sergeant Richard Reynolds at Otis Air National Guard base in Bourne yesterday, thanked guard members and families for their sacrifice.

you're going to do better, aren't you?"

Approximately 1,500 of the 2,000 Army National Guardsmen from Massachusetts who have been activated since the United States began sending troops to the Persian Gulf are either overseas or are ready to be deployed, officials said. Of the state's 3,000 Air National Guardsmen, 300 are helping the war effort in the Gulf.

Most of the 300 soldiers and aviators who gathered for Romney's visit are not on active duty. They work day jobs at the base servicing F-15 fighters, or doing paperwork, and don their green fatigues only for weekend training. But at any minute, literally, they could be called into active service, or even sent to war.

For many, that knowledge has made the war feel close, though the battleground is far away.

"We were just told that six of us from my shop alone could go within the next 72 hours," said Master Sergeant Tom Rudzik, 40, of Plymouth, a vehicle maintenance supervisor.

Rudzik said he volunteered to go to Afghanistan in 2001, and spent 90 days at an Air Force base in Kuwait. Knowing what he'll face again, he admitted he's not "pumped up" to return.

"But I'll go if they tell me," he said above the blaring engine noise of a landing F-15. "Whether you're for the war or not, 9/11 changes everything."

On base, televisions in lunchrooms have been tuned to CNN nonstop as other servicemen and women hope for news of comrades from the 102d Fighter Wing or the 180th Engineer Battalion who have already been sent over.

While the 102d's main mission

is homeland security, some servicemen and women said they felt guilt for not being on the front lines.

"You see the guys out there in the desert, and we're here watching them at home with our families," said Joe Richardson, 25, of Braintree, who works on fighter plane electrical systems.

Even if the state's National Guard members are not called to active duty during the conflict, it's very likely they will go overseas to relieve troops should the United States establish an occupation force, said Cliff McDonald, a public affairs officer for the 102d.

"You get butterflies and all excited about being part of this," said Chief Master Sergeant Jay Hill, who has worked on the base for 34 years. "And then, you get nervous when you see your comrades on the screen."